

# SOCIAL SCIENCES AS SCIENCES AND “HERMENEUTICS”

“MATTEO RICCI’S LEGACY”

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## *Main Thesis*

Some general remarks on the suitable adoption of an “hermeneutic turn” in qualitative social sciences are sketched here. An allegiance among different methodical approaches is recommended because urgently needed for the sake of reliable qualitative research outputs, as the following examples highlight. A slight different but still compatible insight in considering “Matteo Ricci’s legacy” can be expressed this way, so far as the qualitative social sciences heuristic relevance is aimed: how to tackle by means of a renewed Hermeneutics the European burden in term of misleading constructions of “Otherness”.

## *Outline*

1. *Symbolic violence* (par. 1) is the fundamental concept of the entire essay, indicating the pervasive symbolic dimension of the construction of the still unavoidable “identity” discourse, which, according to the case in question, has become the main source of injurious interiorization of distorted images of the self, of the individual set of competences and attitudes delivering to him/her internal coherence and adequateness to social roles.
2. By means of the categories of *memory*, *remembering* and *repression*, the notion of symbolic violence is employed in the diagnosis of the “condition of concealment of the post-colonial past” of the European polity (par. 2).
3. An allegiance between diverse but convergent methodical and critical approaches in the social sciences (the so called “auditory turn”/

acroamatic turn) could open some even minimal breaches in the wall of the mainstream, made up of the social science conceptual kit of tools and operational patterns (par. 3, 4).

### 1. *The Way the "European West" Deals with the Categories of Symbolic Violence*

Affirming the leading role of a category, as symbolic violence is, implies at the same time the primary cognitive focusing on the sense of processes and vocabularies of asymmetrical and penalizing construction of the identities of the dominated<sup>1</sup>. It should not in fact be forgotten that it is only in the last few decades that the depositories of the cultural heritage of the European West have been observed and studied methodically and by the institutions in which knowledge is produced by those who were once subject to processes of domination. This does not at all mean, as will be confirmed further on, that the processes of colonization really occurred on a tabula rasa, in a terra nullius; on the contrary, they occurred against the background of pre-existing socio-institutional histories and structures, which, even when they were destroyed or radically assimilated, influenced the colonial symbolic and material patterns of domination. In any case, the myth of peoples without a past is what the subjugated have been led to believe, in some countries, and for generations. One of the gravest injuries inflicted on the collective self-awareness of the colonized by the mechanisms of subjugation is precisely the denial and concealment at an institutional and scientific level of not only the relevance, but even the existence, of such shared and entangled histories<sup>2</sup>; in them, the existing asymmetries between the position of the dominated and the canonical descriptive language did not totally cancel the native aspects of self-representation. These elements came together in an spurious form and constituted partly the images of the identity of the dominated themselves, portrayed and stored in the minds of the colonists. For the dominated to have any visibility, such self-representations were already the product of processes of accommodation, selection and

<sup>1</sup> E. SAID, *Globalizing literary study*, in «Publications of the Modern Language Association of America», 2001, 116, pp. 64-68, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> S. CONRAD-S. RANDEIRA, *Einleitung. Geteilte Geschichten. Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt*, in Id. (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2002, pp. 9-50.

mutation. The notion of auto-ethnography defines such situations of cultural interchange as not free of domination. They were multilateral constructions, diversified context by context, marked by processes of creative resistance, or of self-regulation. In them, the reactive aspects combine with the proactive aspects, symbolico-cultural crystallizations endowed with a stable and shared meaning, the results of which are neither pre-constituted nor predictable. Such processes therefore initiated practices of symbolic creation through the construction of the nomenclature of all realities, natural and social. As such, they had a structural importance for the identities both of the colonizers and of the colonized, in that they established the very conditions of the visibility of physical and human entities, of individuals and social roles, of collective aggregates, of the spatial and symbolic structuring of the territories in which the colonists and colonized interacted asymmetrically. The antithesis between city and country, between savage world and civilized world, was rewritten in loco, and the transformation of the pre-existing urban structures was pursued in such a way as to redefine the identity of populations<sup>3</sup>. The theme of domination needs to be reinterpreted, with the necessary critical caution, as symbolic violence, in the sense of processes and vocabularies of asymmetrical, in this case penalizing construction of the identities of the dominated<sup>4</sup>. Thus, with the restatement of the precious warning already suggested above by the mention of auto-ethnography: if such individuals and groups were marginal in the weaving of the symbolic narratives that were socially and politically determining for themselves and their own descendants, then the ubiquitous consistence of the assumption should be contested, and related, context by context, to the situations and ways in which symbolic violence is countered by languages of creativity, as well as of resistance<sup>5</sup>. It remains, however, true that symbolic violence

<sup>3</sup> M.L. PRATT, *Introduction*, in Id., *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London-New York 1989, pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Impossible to mention all the literature on the subject. Emblematic C. LÉVI STRAUSS, *Tristes tropiques*, Plon, Paris 1955; for an overall, updated vision, F. TEDESCO, "Violenza simbolica" [Item/voce], in M. Flores (ed.), *Diritti umani. Cultura dei diritti e dignità della persona nell'epoca della globalizzazione*, vol. II, Dizionario (H-W), Utet, Torino 2007. From the point of view of the cultural geography oriented towards colonial studies see: S. LEGG, *Spaces of Colonialism*, Blackwell, London 2007; S. BERTHON-A. ROBINSON, *The Shape of the World: The Mapping and Discovery of the Earth*, George Philip Ed., London 1991.

<sup>5</sup> The expression indicates the normalization of domination, the fact of the omnipresence and the cognitive, perceptive and symbolic interiorization of it by the dominated. «Things are running this way, so must be, nobody even see or is puzzled or angry about». In this sense, G.C. SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern speak?*, in C. Nelson-L. Grossberg

is exercised whenever the depositories of languages “lay down the law”, adopt a perspective that is surreptitiously over-ordered, because falsely neutral and universal, on every dimension of social reality different from their own. We can summarize as following. Processes of colonization did not really occurred on a tabula rasa, in a terra nullius. The myth of peoples without a past is what the subjugated have been led to believe, in some countries, and for generations: one of the gravest injuries inflicted on the collective self-awareness of the colonized. The notion of auto-ethnography defines such situations of cultural interchange as not free of domination. They were multilateral constructions, diversified context by context, marked by processes of creative resistance, or of self-regulation. In them, the reactive aspects combine with the proactive aspects, symbolico-cultural crystallizations endowed with a stable and shared meaning, the results of which are neither pre-constituted nor predictable. The antithesis between city and country, between savage world and civilized world, was rewritten in loco, and the transformation of the pre-existing urban structures was pursued in such a way as to redefine the identity of populations. The theme of domination needs to be reinterpreted, with the necessary critical caution, as symbolic violence, in the sense of processes and vocabularies of asymmetrical and penalizing construction of the identities of the dominated.

## 2. *Memory and Repression of the Colonial Past; the “European West” Confronting Itself*

The lexicon of liberation from oppression, as struggle for self-determination, could be considered with grounded argument as paradigmatic of European westerners self-representations. According to French republican colonialism narratives, which are based on the universalism of the rights of freedom and equality, the unity of the human kind was seen symbolically as a mission still to be accomplished with and through civilizing, not yet as an actual reality. What establishes, legitimizes and perpetuates the conditions, both outer and inner, of subordination is the proclamation itself, for a population, of its temporary, but indefinite, existence in a condition of cultural, institutional and social minority that can only be overcome under the guidance of and through emulation

(eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 1988, pp. 271-313.

of the model of the colonizers. With respect to the self-representations of which we, European westerners, are capable, the oximoric example quoted above (French republican colonialism) would be paradigmatic for at least one of the most effective and pervasive narratives with which Europe has nourished its own identity, the universalism of the rights of freedom and equality, the lexicon of liberation from oppression. One of such master narratives is now to be criticised by means of the category of symbolic violence, we introduced for the very beginning, which disavails the “Janos” surface of the phenomena of subjugation and of “unamitted” (because inconceivable), or unconscious oblivion of the first by side of the oppressors. In drawing up and justifying such a narrative, the social subjects and beneficiaries of such an account would remain blind in the face of their own internal contradictions. Should the European West ever realize what it implies to be looked at in turn by someone else, it should confront at least three typologies of non-acknowledgement/concealment of its own misdeeds with respect to the colonial past and to the present: ignoring, forgetting, repressing.

As developments in the qualitative social sciences show us, the three modes of concealment are by now part of a vocabulary that is shared by studies of memory and of remembering, and is no longer strictly restricted to the languages of psychoanalysis, of psychology, of schools of psychotherapy<sup>6</sup>; rather it is enriched and complicated thanks to the contributions of the historical social disciplines, and those of political science. If, on the one hand, by memory (individual) is mostly meant today a conceptual territory limited to the acquisition and maintenance (archiving, storing) of lived experiences and past actions<sup>7</sup>, on the other, by the concept of remembering is meant «Consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) of lived experiences and past actions in so far as they are past»<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> As well known, it's the theory of the stages through which the drives of the child are formed and reformed with respect to the potentialities of the libido, so that the child can achieve for him/herself security and vital equilibrium through elusions.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike common philosophical knowledge, (the same employed in the construction of the school and university system in Italy half a century ago), in which the concept of memory indicated exactly “State of consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) in which lived experiences and past actions are recalled in so far as they are past” (E.P. LAMANNA-E. ADORNO, *Dizionario di termini filosofici*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1969). As can be seen clearly, in such a definition memory encompasses remembering completely, if such a definition is compared with the semantic specification between the two terms, mentioned in the text.

<sup>8</sup> M. QUANTE, “Identità” [Item], in N. Pethes-P. Ruchatz (eds.), *Dizionario della memoria e del ricordo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2002, pp. 243-245.

The over cited category of repression, not in mere antithesis to remembering, should no longer be considered an exclusive monopoly of the Freudian scholarship. Rather, the descriptive nucleus relevant here for repression is that relating to the social mechanisms of partial remembering, oriented towards the diminution of painful states. Such mechanisms elude, avoid, procrastinate the acknowledgement by the group of situations, conditions, states of things: the conscious public treatment of such matters is perceived as heralding suffering and laceration. Such mechanisms are triggered if the origins of the predicted pain are guilty acts committed in the past and not yet admitted or punished. Such repression produces social pathologies because it misleads and falsifies, to the detriment of the actors, the construction of the perspective that links the generations in a shared narrative, which cannot in any way coincide with self-deception and concealment, without the identify-forming narrative being condemned to implausibility and therefore to ineffectiveness. Such concealment has produced the gravest aporia: an unduly selective, and therefore unjustified, ascription of such dignity of universal beings to some human groups, but not to all, even if provisionally. The unity of the human kind was seen symbolically as a mission still to be accomplished with and through civilizing, not yet as an actual reality. We should not be reassured by the fact that such a process was put into effect by universalist politics, outside and even antithetical to the racialist theories that preach the natural and insurmountable irreducibility of biological type between the higher human strain and those strains defined as inferior. What really establishes, legitimizes and perpetuates the conditions, both outer and inner, of subordination is the proclamation itself, for a population, of its temporary, but indefinite, existence in a status of cultural, institutional and social minority; this status that can only be overcome under the guidance of and through emulation of the model of the colonizers.

Refusing to confront the conceptual and symbolic subordination generated by the asymmetrical confrontation set up by the dominators with respect to “other” cultures, means failing to evaluate the true weight of colonial culture within not only French, but also European and Western culture. The most subtly poisonous aspect of such a long-lasting and permanent non-declaration of one’s own aporias is that this cognitive “repressed content” is still deceitfully pervasive with respect to the universalist and progressive model of emancipation, which, despite the recurrent criticisms regarding its effectiveness, is still considered by many to be the unquestioned conceptual cornerstone of the civil conscience



and political identity of the Union tout court. If such an apparatus is not deconstructed, all the legitimate claims to be defending the lasting unassailable nucleus of the language of rights and emancipation against its detractors could be nullified. If such an apparatus is to be consolidated, because of its veritable core, a profound revisiting of its lexicon should be undertaken and the harm inflicted on the subjugated in their self-representations should be taken into consideration; such moral “disablements” are the most long-lasting, also because they have not yet been recognized as such. Accepting as one’s own a configuration, a form of the self-made by others and for others is only one part of what has happened. The real problems are elsewhere: in the first place, what occurred, occurred because other models or other methods, possessing sufficient credibility and adequate for conceiving and making others, were not available. The identity that is available is so inadequate and oppressive because it is the dictate of those who establish its contexts, constraints and rules proves to be the sole one, exclusive, homogeneous, excluding possible alternatives.

In the second place, the occlusive and disempowering effects of such a *reductio ad unum* cannot be cancelled with a mere act of will or conscious reflection, but last over time and over generations, producing, in the majority of cases, moral, social and political asphyxia. Such outcomes are induced by processes by which the subordinate subjects interiorize an identity that is made to measure for others, but is inadequate, “ill-fitting” for them; for them it is a matter of adapting to identity constructs made up of socially appreciated qualities, and fixed as a universal objective of emancipation for all, without distinctions. It is precisely such constructs that the subordinates are called to emulate, deforming themselves in order to fit the single model. The hetero-induced distortion cited by Charles Taylor<sup>9</sup> could be drafted to some extent as equivalent to the notion, more familiar to a gendered approach to epistemic and social criticism, of adaptive preferences, that is to say, the mechanisms through which the model is propagated are processes of interiorization, mimetic adaptation being the condition for the subordinate to be able to emerge in the competition for social resources<sup>10</sup>. There is a need for critical

<sup>9</sup> Paradigmatically, CH. TAYLOR, *The Politics of Recognition*, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, pp. 25-73.

<sup>10</sup> Among other contributions, G. ZINCONI, *Uno schermo contro il razzismo*, il Mulino, Bologna 1994; Id. (ed.), *Secondo rapporto sull’integrazione degli immigrati in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna 2001.

studies in which the deconstruction of the concept of culture brings out the limits of a legitimizing acceptance of the taxonomy between civilized and non-civilized cultures; it should be stated that such a contraposition is in line with a false postulate, that according to which the existence of an untranslatability between cultures and of cultural prisons is accepted and propagated as true. French republican colonialism and its contradictions constitute a clear example of what has just been outlined regarding the acceptance of the dichotomic vision according to which “my” culture is in its fundamentals untranslatable into the terms of “another” culture, because the latter is still in a condition of immaturity with respect to mine. This aggravates therefore the task of those who, whether scientists and citizens, are setting about the work of revealing and recognizing the repression of identity that affects us. This kind of theoretical bias can even prepare the way for the naturalization of cultural differences. The presumption of incontrovertibility of the attribution, does not change, even if the contents and the sign, positive or negative, that is attributed to such features is modified. The positive values attributed by the colonized to the civil and social model being emulated are the confirmation of the position of inadequacy and inferiority in which subordinate persons find themselves with respect to such a model.

The hetero-induced distortion already mentioned above is another name for what gender studies call “ill-fitting” identity or adaptive preferences, that is to say, the mechanisms through which the model is propagated are processes of interiorization, mimetic adaptation being the condition for the subordinate to be able to emerge in the competition for social resources. Thus, the specific cognitive interest of post-colonial literature consists in the description of how the victims of the negative portrait/stereotype interiorize the ill-fitting image of themselves. By means of a gendered sensitive and hermeneutical approach, is possible to define with greater rigour the reciprocity, and often circularity, of the bond between victims and authors of harmful acts and violations.

### *3. Science, Subjects, Stories. At the Confluence of Diverse Methodological Approaches*

Postcolonial scholars largely investigated the character and functioning of colonial and imperial sciences, with the aim of disclosing their



role in the establishment of governing institutions<sup>11</sup>. Their research focused on the role of everyday scientific practices in the social normalisation process and on the importance of knowledge production practices for the emergence of individual and collective identity. Critical scholars attempted at faithfully reporting voices and stories of colonised people (natives, indigenous, locals...) and at pointing out the elements of discordance that emerged from the comparison between authentic indigenous narratives and the narratives surreptitiously introduced by the newcomers<sup>12</sup>.

The colonial encounters as source of subaltern identity construction and symbolic violence, have been analysed, from one side, by the discourse analysis approach (most notably advanced by the celebrated culture analysts Mary Louise Pratt); from the other side, by regional postcolonial studies. The confluence of the two approaches in the postcolonial research made it possible to avoid essentialist representation of the colonial subjects by expanding the research on their symbolic production (i.e., as Pratt clarifies: «Oral texts, written texts, lost texts, secret texts, texts appropriated, abridges, translated, anthologized, and plagiarized, letters, reports, survival tales, civic description, navigational narrative, monsters and marvels, medicinal treatises, academic polemics, old myths replayed and reverses»)<sup>13</sup>; and their material practices, including scientific practices. This process might offer a rich and articulated view of diverse actors and modes of social agency; «competing vision of colonial officials, humanitarians and settlers, and [...] different kinds of spaces and conflicting geographies [that] created missions, stations, farms, government spaces of control, and social spaces of segregation»<sup>14</sup>.

Sentimental travel writing, drawing and painting, scientific reporting, natural specimens and artifacts shipment and mailing were all essential practices for edifying the colonial imaginary; they effectively contributed to the elaboration of the self-ethnographic project put forward by the dominant elites – both western and colonial. The complex of everyday-life scientific practices not only made the new worlds knowable and controllable, but also reinvented brand-new local-based identities in

<sup>11</sup> D. CLAYTON, *Critical Imperial and Colonial Geographies*, in K. Anderson-M. Domosh-S. Pile-N. Thrift (eds.), *The Handbook of Cultural Geography*, Sage, London 2003, pp. 354-368; D. CLAYTON, *Imperial Geographies*, in J. Duncan-N. Johnson-R. Schein (eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, Blackwell, London 2004, pp. 449-68.

<sup>12</sup> D. CLAYTON, *Imperial geographies*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> M.L. PRATT, *Imperial Eyes*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> D. CLAYTON, *Critical Imperial and Colonial Geographies*, cit., p. 361.

the “contact zones”. Contact zones, as Pratt reminds us, were particularly significant spaces, both for the practical consequences of their existence, and for their symbolic value. They were: «space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict»<sup>15</sup>. In the contact zones transculturalization processes occurred; this entailed, on the one hand, the identification of local people with the category of subordination and marginalisation; and, on the other hand, the acceptance of the external narratives and imaginaries as adequate self-description by subaltern people. However transculturalisation also induced a re-reading process of the dominant culture resident in the colonies, which turned into hybrid cultures developing specific characters and affirming their autonomy from the motherland.

Colonial age provides a wealth of examples describing the instrumental use of sciences as “tools” of the empires<sup>16</sup> and sources of a new governmentality. In fact, out of the laboratory routines and the ideal of a pure scientific research<sup>17</sup>, modern sciences and its practitioners have been explicitly induced to serve the interest of colonial efficiency. In the unspoken effort of establishing new power geometries in an broadening world, colonial sciences gave name to the newly discovered beings and things. It produced a complex body of norms, devices and procedures (including international classification systems, laboratories and cabinets, shipping technologies, routes, and tools for long-distance control) with the aim of ordinating all existing beings in accurate taxonomies, and to find a proper place for the newly discovered, awkward and exotic creatures in the western cosmology. Technical devices and theoretical apparatus were functional to the exercise of power via the non-naïve connection between political and scientific processes.

Through the diffusion and imposition of European science (and the eradication of other epistemic traditions), Europeans, together with the territorial occupation, also established the occupation of intellectual space<sup>18</sup>. The development of natural and human sciences came together

<sup>15</sup> M.L. PRATT, *Imperial Eyes*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> The definition is broadly adopted in post-colonial studies, see for instance S.H. BROWN, *A Tool of Empire: The British Medical Establishment in Lagos, 1861-1905*, in «*The International Journal of African Historical Studies*», vol. 37, n. 2, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> A. GOSS, *Decent colonialism? Pure science and colonial ideology in the Netherlands East Indies, 1910-1929*, in «*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*», vol. 40, n. 1, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> R. MACLEOD, *Reading the Discourse of Colonial Science*, in R. Waast-P. Petitjean

with the invention of a “tropical technocracy” linking local elites and the language of sovereignty, rationality and civilising mission of western political thought<sup>19</sup>. Not infrequently, scientific discoveries both celebrated the Western supremacy and legitimized and justified the exercise of symbolic violence over colonised lands and people. Particularly, scientific work has been largely functional to the «west’s propensity to demand and dominate the other, and emphasized the binary [...] cast of colonial discourse»<sup>20</sup>. Under the pretended neutral scientific authority, western sciences turned into solid and normative structures of knowledge, in the face of the abundance, diversity and anxiety generated by the encounter with the new worlds. This determined the emergence of a planetary culture – still resonant today with some universalist claims, which coincided with the culture of the Western educated bourgeoisie.

Particularly, geography and natural science did not only worked as tools of description, but also tools of production of objects themselves of scientific interest. By providing accurate descriptions of human and non-human nature, scientific discourses were intended to represent things as they really were; this effort offered reliable evidences for elaborating political discourses on the base of a (pretended) objective knowledge. The necessity, indeed, to legitimate moral imperatives on the base of scientific evidence called for modelling the data according to the theory they were required to support. The close relationship between science-production and power-generating apparatuses stand on the assumption that it was possible to deduce how things have to be from (the representation of) how things are. In this context, science was a powerful means to advance social and political claims on the authority of truth.

The crucial point resides, thus, in the possibility to come to know the truth because, as the post-positivist epistemology pointed out<sup>21</sup>, there is no knowledge out of the knowing possibility of the subject; and thus there is no science out of the cultural environment it is entwined with. Sociology of science largely built upon Thomas Kuhn’s notes of the relevance of extra-scientific factors in science revolution<sup>22</sup>, and focused on

(eds.), *Les sciences hors d’Occident au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, vol. II, Orstom, Paris 1996.

<sup>19</sup> R. MACLEOD, *Reading the Discourse of Colonial Science*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> D. CLAYTON, *Critical Imperial and Colonial Geographies*, cit., p. 356.

<sup>21</sup> Post-positivist epistemology critically approached the results of the Vienna Circle and advanced original claims of the structure of scientific research, notably Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Norwood Hanson and Stephen Toulmin.

<sup>22</sup> T.S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1970.

the complex relation between scientific and extra-scientific elements in the production of a normalised form of knowledge. Science's description of the world is biased by the partiality of the observer's gaze, partisan of specific scientific paradigms<sup>23</sup> and influenced by social preferences and personal beliefs. It cannot be denied that the selection of a single, amongst many, method of observation is not merely operated on the base of the consideration of the nature of the research; but it also depends on the preferences of the observing subject and the goals he intends to achieve. What we see is conditioned by the methods of observation and not infrequently the scientific "labour" is hidden under the appearance of the self-evident results. As Kuhn himself noted, the result of the scientific research may hide the work that contributed to its production<sup>24</sup>. By pushing this argumentation to its extreme consequences, it could be argued that there is no possibility for objective representation of the world, because there is no subject able to produce a representation of the world from an external standpoint. The epistemic process always proceeds from one island of meaning to another<sup>25</sup>, so that what the researcher can actually see is not the totality, rather a small number of elements confirming or confuting his/her research hypotheses, on the base of his/her pre-existent knowledge. Data are carved out in the effort of building a coherent, demonstrable and theoretically solid description of reality. However, coherence, demonstrability and solidity have not a necessary relation with truth.

The context of observation, the position (both in the physical and theoretical space), the relationship with the object of observation and the background stories are crucial elements in the production of knowledge. The dividing line between relevant and not relevant elements in the epistemological process is a fuzzy one, and historical, social, psychological, political and economic aspects play a key role in the knowledge production<sup>26</sup>. As the prominent science philosopher Isabelle

<sup>23</sup> The term introduced by Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of 1962, assumes two different meanings: a first meaning of *disciplinary matrix* of a community of scientists (i.e. a whole of shared commitments which condition the choice and solution of the scientific issues faced), and a second meaning (i.e. effective solutions of problems that are part of the disciplinary matrix of a scientific community).

<sup>24</sup> T.S. KUHN, *The Essential Tension*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1977.

<sup>25</sup> S. TAGLIAGAMBE, *Lalbero flessibile. La cultura della progettualità*, Dunod, Milano 1998.

<sup>26</sup> H.I. BROWN, *Perception, Theory and Commitment. The New Philosophy of*

Stengers notes, science can be analysed as any other social activity, as it is not more universal nor rational than others<sup>27</sup>. Impossible objectivity, subject positioning, relevance of personal stories and collective history are all intertwined elements in the advancement of scientific practices, because science is, like other human activity, the product of historical knowledge; it is a social phenomenon whose methodology and basic rules are conditioned by the circumstances in which it operates, and by extra-methodological factors<sup>28</sup>. When science is no longer thought of as supplier of absolute truth, its capacity for ideological construction and its strict relation with the political and cultural power become manifest. Biologist Richard Lewontin explains that the dominating social and economic forces broadly determine what science does and how it does it. On the one hand, social influence and control on what scientists do and say, and on the other, the use of what scientists do and say in supporting institutions and societal organisation make it possible to speak of science as ideology<sup>29</sup>.

This complex relationship with the world outside of the laboratory influences scientists’ research possibilities and the availability of funds require them to abandon the independent standpoint where pure research can be carried out. As philosopher of science Stefan Amsterdamski claims:

When scientific research becomes a professional duty which the scientist owes to the organization that found his/her research, the situation changes dramatically. The scientist then becomes either an employee working under the control of a supervisor, or an individual free-lancer living on income from contracts from institutions conducting research, or a manager who organizes research<sup>30</sup>.

Therefore, science cannot be really – i.e. *unconditionally* – objective because it outcomes from scientists’ work, which is embedded, historically determined and emplaced. Despite the aspiration toward objective knowledge, scientists’ activity is necessarily defined as the product

*Science*, Precedent Publishing, Chicago 1977.

<sup>27</sup> I. STENGERS, *Le politiche della ragione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1993.

<sup>28</sup> S. AMSTERDAMSKI, *Between History and Method: Disputes about the Rationality of Science*, Springer, New York 1992.

<sup>29</sup> R. LEWONTIN, *Not In Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature*, Random House, London 1984.

<sup>30</sup> S. AMSTERDAMSKI, *Between History and Method*, cit., p. 80.

of a determined “me, here and now”<sup>31</sup>. While the choice of the investigation criteria and rules is influenced by the desire to understand reality – an otherwise elusive entity; however, scientists are burdened by the original sin of knowledge limitation<sup>32</sup>. The subject is doubly contextualised: in a determinate body, physical space and time; and in a cultural system that generates its ontological landscape and cognitive structure<sup>33</sup>. Scientist creates his/her own object and the categories that are useful to investigate it; he/she produces a reality that does not exist *per se*, but can be investigated and considered as trustworthy evidence by the scientific community<sup>34</sup>.

Science, as the legitimate producer of truth and knowledge, according to Rorty’s concept of epistemology<sup>35</sup>, is a powerful instrument for imposing order on the crowded world by categorizing and giving name to the external reality. It is the source of the social and political normalising power. In Rorty’s terms, shaping the conduct of society in line with government strategies of normalisation means making society act on the base of normal discourse, which are the result of rational common agreements on what counts as a good argument to act<sup>36</sup>. Good arguments are based on knowledge, and knowledge, Michel Foucault reminds, is in a relation of reciprocal constitution with power techniques, so that it may easily turn into an instrument of government<sup>37</sup>. In order to become effective, normalisation process requires political government to establish permanent and intimate relationships with technicians and experts in diverse scientific fields<sup>38</sup>. Scientists and technicians are therefore urged by governments to offer the solution to the principal problems by

<sup>31</sup> E. GAGLIASSO, *Verso un’epistemologia del mondo vivente*, Guerini, Milano 2001.

<sup>32</sup> G. BOCCHI-M. CERUTI (eds.), *La sfida della complessità*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1986.

<sup>33</sup> E. VON GLASERSFELD, *Il complesso di semplicità*, in G. Bocchi-M. Ceruti, *La sfida della complessità*, cit.

<sup>34</sup> I. STENGERS, *Power and Invention: Situating Science*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997.

<sup>35</sup> R. RORTY, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>36</sup> R. RORTY, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1980.

<sup>37</sup> M. FOUCAULT, *Society Must be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Picador, New York 2003.

<sup>38</sup> The geographer Jonathan Murdoch writes: «As the engagement between state and society becomes more complex, so it becomes increasingly apparent that if modern government are to manage the multiple domain of civil life, they must have some understanding of these domains» (J. MURDOCH, *Post-structuralist Geography*, Sage, London 2006, p. 43).



allowing politicians to better calculate the effects of diverse conducts, education and management models, tactics of persuasion, incitement, and motivation.

Despite expertise grounded on science authority is presented as neutral domain, it produces in fact tight relationships between knowledge and power. When science becomes the most widespread form of knowledge, in the option of advancing an enlarged and inclusive political government, the practices of science production and results diffusion need to be seriously taken into consideration. This might be possible through the adoption of appropriate procedures for incremental dialogue crossing the laboratory walls and the development of methodological tools to take multiple voices into account. As political philosopher Andrew Dobson notes politics has been usually associated with speech, the capacity to speak and communicate judgments; however a careful ability to listen, often forgot by political theorists, may reverse democratic ability of speaking in the ability of listening<sup>39</sup>. This is crucial for science, before of being crucial for politics, as it leads to abandon the idea of the “trumping” role of science based on the incontestable authority of nature, which short-circuits democratic debate and precludes the emergence of any preliminary deliberative arena. This pre-institutional, hopefully frantic, pluralistic and heterogeneous deliberative and public frame for opinion building would enable, indeed, citizens to achieve whatsoever grounded and reflected collective awareness of the multiple implication of the issues at stake. Social scientists who, in more recent times, adhered to the so called hermeneutic/acroamatic turn are the closer ally to citizens in the search for a relatively unbiased understanding of the phenomena impacting their own lives – the same citizens who are pursuing a critical point of view about the state of things in political realm.

A fruitful, valuable, almost neglected dimension of the hermeneutical methods would be usefully recovered and enacted as a precious part and a conceptual tool-kit of the heuristic heritage. The acroamatic dimension (i.e. the interpretative attitude of hearing and listening to somebody telling) is here proposed as an adequate and effective means to make recourse again the “noble” set of methodologies called Hermeneutic. In doing this we figure ourselves to be put – temporarily – in the asymmetric location of a pupil who is convinced to give his/her own

<sup>39</sup> A. DOBSON, *Democracy and Nature: Speaking and Listening*, working paper, 2008, available on line <http://www.andrewdobson.com/Democracyandnaturespeakingandlistening.doc> [last accessed 12.12.2012].

attention, keeping silence, to somebody else, who exhibits and possesses – *rebus sic stantibus* – the authoritative and cognitive role of a privileged testimony about something totally or almost unknown. Or again, we can figure ourselves to be the audience in a concert, who is gently requested and committed, for the sake of the game played, to respectfully guarantee silence and quietness, in order to let the performer give his/her own best in setting and performing his/her interpretation (always a totally inedit one) never fulfilled in this peculiar way before, so long as the needs of the performance must be accomplished, and no longer. This kind of temporary asymmetric condition is not imposed, rather it sets some self-evident contextual constraints existing exactly because of the cognitive goal at stake. To summarise we should learn to abandon for a while the surreptitiously over-ordered glance upon the world, vocabulary and nomenclature of “scientific master narrators” we are used to adopt as self-evident in each circumstance. To accept for a while – better for a long – the role of a listener is recommended as the most eligible method for nowadays social scientists, who are mostly engaged in discovering the hidden interrelations among cultural and social phenomena, only *prima facie* well-known and feasible.

#### 4. *Some (Only Drafted) Conclusions*

In the social sciences paradigm, more than ever if research is oriented towards action, and we possess as researcher the master-narrative (“we” are the master of symbols and names so far) we must avoid giving credit *ex ante* to our domestic vision of a particular reality. Thus reflexively controlled social praxis is configured with respect to the theory of the social sciences. Praxis becomes therefore the arena for the new scientific research. In language there is grammar, syntax, pragmatics; this last indicates and analyses the lived uses of the first two.

The great teaching of praxis is that, if it becomes pragmatics of vital languages, it is at the same time the object and the context of knowledge. This requires, of course, an infinity of cases, of possibilities, of microscopic pieces of research. This does not mean not having pre-constituted concepts, but admitting having them, and being prepared for them to be demolished or at least rectified. Therefore is appropriate even the metaphor of the journey towards the ideal point that is not known. Such a metaphorical journey presupposes the humility of those who

abstain from asserting and imposing their own vision of things. It is the humility of those who, going to a distant, and culturally alien country, do not speak for a year, but limit themselves to listening, as Matteo Ricci did for a whole year, the first he spent in China by the imperial Court. Such a way of approaching events is methodological ductility and highly recommended.

This implies the following: to try to perceive, to allow oneself to be aroused from within, not only through the mind, but also through modes of self-situating and acting, without obviously excluding the possibility of saying no to certain fundamental questions, and rejecting imitation as such. However, it is not only a matter of moral humility, but of a fundamental cognitive attitude. An extremely rich, and not only evocative, dimension of the hermeneutics, that of listening in the position of the pupil towards the master in a living context of sharing communication, should be recovered and applied under controlled conditions and in limited time slot. We should act primarily (not exhaustively) as they who are listening without interfering with the source of the message, just like the public in a music concert, as long as the concert takes place: *ακροαστής/ακουσμαστικός*.

It fits the intellectual honesty according to which it is necessary to start from the assumption that phenomena are probably different from how we consider them at first. The solution will be reached, it is to be hoped, in the end. Starting from this predisposition one can therefore try to understand with an openness, as was said above, that is not only moral, but also cognitive. It is mental openness, and the willingness to let oneself be involved and affected, not mechanically, or mimetically, but rather in a nobly pragmatic manner which is not predetermined according to the mere dualistic type of reasoning; acceptance/rejection.